

HOW TO JUMP THROUGH THE HOOPS:

TOP TIPS FOR EXAM SUCCESS

OVERVIEW

- (1) COMMAND WORDS AND HOW TO DE-CODE THEM
- (2) EXAM TECHNIQUE
- (3) THE IMPORTANCE OF “RTBQ”
- (4) WHAT PARENTS CAN DO TO HELP



(A) COMMAND WORDS

(1) WHAT ARE THEY?

Command words are the guides in the question that identify which assessment objective is being targeted. They can provide vital clues about:

- What to write
- How much to write
- How you should structure your answer

IT IS VITAL THAT STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THE MEANING AND DEMANDS OF DIFFERENT COMMAND WORDS.

(2) A GLOSSARY OF KEY COMMAND WORDS

COMMAND WORD	WHAT THE COMMAND WORD MEANS AND WHAT IT WANTS YOU TO DO
<i>Analyse</i>	Identify key points and explain them in detail. Try to explore relationships between different ideas. Use as much technical language related to the subject as you can.
<i>Apply</i>	Take a theoretical point and explain it's relevance in a particular context.
<i>Calculate</i>	Do the sum. Clearly show you're working out.
<i>Compare</i>	Look at how 2 or more variables/pieces of data/texts etc are similar and how they are different. Explain your reasons fully.
<i>Contrast</i>	Identify and explain in detail the differences.
<i>Critically assess</i>	Identify the reasons for and against a particular idea and explain them carefully and in detail.
<i>Define</i>	Give the meaning of a key word.
<i>Describe</i>	Write in detail about something, showing you have knowledge and understanding of the key idea.
<i>Discuss</i>	Show that you can identify and write about 2 or more sides of an argument; you must identify and analyse key ideas and end with a reasoned judgement about the issue in question.
<i>Distinguish between</i>	Explain the difference between 2 things.
<i>Estimate</i>	Think of some "best guess" numbers for the bits of the problem and do your calculations based on these "best guess" numbers.
<i>Evaluate</i>	Identify and analyse different views/sides of an argument in order to reach a balanced judgement about the issue.
<i>Explain</i>	Make it clear that you can take a point and write about it with accuracy and precision so that you demonstrate clear knowledge

	AND understanding.
Illustrate	Write down some examples to make your ideas clear
Interpret	Explain the meaning in your own words-for example you might be asked to interpret what a graph shows-you should describe and explain what the graph shows.
Justify	Write down and explain your reasons to support an argument or action.
Measure	Decide what sort of measurement is needed and then use this measurement scale (For example a length in maths would be measured using a ruler; Macbeth's actions in English could be measured against an identified set of moral standards and judged by taking evidence from the play.
Outline	Identify and write about the key points. Leave out smaller details.
Predict	Using your own knowledge and what has happened before in the same sort of situations, work out what you think will happen in this situation. Make sure you explain the reasons for your prediction.
Relate	Write about the connection between things.
Review	Write about the topic, explaining it clearly from all points of view.
Sketch	Draw a simple diagram, graph or picture and LABEL it to show what is important.
State	Identify and write down a key point.
Suggest	Identify and write about possible answers to a particular issue or problem.
Summarise	Bring together and mention all the main points when you write your answer. You don't have to write about all the details of each point you make.

(3) COMMAND WORDS AND THE ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES

Command words provide vital clues as to which assessment objective is being tested. If students can de-code this, they have a better chance of providing the examiner with an answer that demonstrates the skills that they are looking for on a given question.

As a rough guide, the following command words are likely to be used for the following AO's:

AO1 Knowledge and Understanding	AO2 Application	AO3 Analysis	AO4 Evaluation
Define	Apply	Analyse	Advise
Describe	Calculate	Compare and contrast	Evaluate
Explain	Demonstrate	Discuss	Assess
Give	Examine	Explain	Consider
State	Give an example	Which	Discuss
List	Using examples		Explain why
Identify	With reference to..		To what extent
Outline			
State			

(B) EXAM TECHNIQUE:

SOME STRATEGIES!

(1) **IDENTIFY THE SUBJECT MATTER BEING TESTED:** for example: the main reasons for coastal erosion; the Hindu view on life after death; reasons for inflation; the idea of power in Macbeth. You **MUST** ensure that your answer demonstrates clear subject knowledge and understanding-pack it with key words and things that you have learnt. Do not waffle.

(2) **IDENTIFY AND DE-CODE THE COMMAND WORD:** What is the command word? What skill is it testing? How much do you need to write? What skills do you need to demonstrate whilst answering the question? **YOU MUST ENSURE YOU OBEY THE COMMAND WORD.**

Example 1:

Question: ***“Explain 2 reasons why a religious upbringing might make you believe in God.” (RS question)***

Answer:

(1) Because your family believe in God.

(2) Because you go to church a lot.

This candidate has STATED two reasons but they have NOT explained them. They will only score a maximum of half marks on this question.

Example 2:

Question: ***“Using the graph in Item A, describe what has happened to the number of couples getting divorced between 1950 and 2006”. (2 marks)***

Answer:

The graph shows the number of divorces has risen. I think that this is because no-one takes marriage seriously any more and lots of celebrities get divorced. This makes people think divorce is OK.

This candidate strayed away from the command word and in doing so didn't gain all the marks. Their description of the graph is too simple (1 marks only) and they go on to try and EXPLAIN or ANALYSE THE REASONS FOR the graph. The question has not

asked them to do this and they will not get marks for it. They have lost valuable time by writing too much.

(3) FIND WAYS TO BUILD STRUCTURE INTO YOUR ANSWER RATHER THAN JUST RAMBLING.

**Example 1 : “Discuss whether the government should cut unemployment benefit”.
(Economics question)**

Rather than raising random points, plan an answer:

- Identify and explain 2-3 economic reasons why cutting unemployment benefit would be economically desirable. Explain each point clearly using economic language. Try to show the inter-relationship between points.
- Identify and explain 2-3 reasons why cutting unemployment benefit might create economic problems. Explain these ideas.
- End with reasoned judgement showing that you have critically weighed up the evidence.

Example 2: “Explain 2 reasons why some people may be concerned about a rise in immigration.” (CZ question)

Don't waste time re-writing the question, writing “2 reasons why...” is a pointless waste of time. Instead, make a direct point and then write a simple but clear sentence explaining it,

- **It might put pressure on housing:** A rise in immigration will cause a rise in the population and a rise in the demand for houses. If enough new houses are not built this will cause a shortage of houses which may lead to rising house prices or increased homelessness.
- **It might create racial tension:** A rise in immigration may cause more racial and religious diversity. Whilst many welcome this, others feel threatened by it and examples of racism and racial unrest can follow.

Don't be afraid to write in the (1) and (2) or use bullet points to keep answers separate.

(4) USE THE TIPS THAT TEACHERS HAVE TAUGHT YOU

Knowing how to plan and structure answers can be tricky. Many departments will provide students with strategies that they should use to ensure that they meet the demands of marks schemes. Here are some:

(a) **ENGLISH**

The English department suggest that each paragraph in an English essay is based around PEE:

P = POINT-make your point clearly and succinctly

E = EVIDENCE-support your point by referring to the books and where possible quoting from them.

E = EXPLAIN-make it clear to the reader the point you are making by adding detail and explanation.

(b) **ECONOMICS**

The Economics department found that too many able students were achieving B grades rather than A /A* grades. An exam meeting clearly revealed that candidates were showing sound knowledge, understanding and analysis but were not effectively and consistently evaluating points.

To overcome this, the department used an adapted version of the English model and now encourages students to **“flex their PEC’s”** on any longer answer. In Economics the clue that evaluation is required is often the word **“discuss”**.

P=POINT- make the main point of your paragraph simply and clearly.

E=EXPLAIN IT-use as much economic language and analysis as possible to explain your point.

C= COMMENT ON IT-how valid is your point? What does it depend on? Are there any counter arguments? What else needs to be considered?

It is the C that provides the key higher order skill of evaluation. Last year a third of students entering Economics got an A* because this technique scaffolded their answers and allowed them to demonstrate the key skills.

(c) **RS**

The final question on each RS topic always looks something like this:

“Abortion is murder and should be banned”. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer showing that you have considered alternative points of view. (4 marks)

Students love these questions because they are asked their opinions. However they tend to write far too much for 4 marks and often fail to answer the command of the question.

The RS department suggests that students adopt a simple and clear structure.

✓ **State your religious position.**

✓ **Explain what YOUR view is on the issue and explain 2 reasons to back it up.**

- ✓ State an alternative position (ideally choose a clear religious viewpoint such as a Hindu view or a Christian view.
- ✓ Explain clearly the reasons behind their view.

MOCK ANSWER

I am an agnostic; I am unsure about whether God exists. I do not agree with the statement. This is partly because I do not believe that life necessarily starts as soon as the egg is fertilised. I think we should count life beginning at the point of birth. I find the statement offensive and designed to create an emotional response. Some women have abortions for very genuine and sad reasons and to accuse them of murder is unfair.

However a Roman Catholic is likely to agree with this statement. Roman Catholics believe strongly in the sanctity of life-life is sacred and given by God, only God should take life away. Most Roman Catholics believe that life begins at the point when the egg is fertilised by the sperm. They do not accept any reasons why human beings have the right to end the life of the foetus and for this reason many see abortion as an act which is equivalent to murder. In reality some Roman Catholics will think more strongly than others and some may be more sympathetic to abortion than others.

(5) KNOW THE LANGUAGE THAT HELPS YOU
DEMONSTRATE THE KEY SKILLS DEMANDED BY THE
COMMAND WORD.

For example, longer answer questions which require candidates to analyse and evaluate key ideas often require a concluding paragraph. In this paragraph the candidate needs to demonstrate clearly evaluative skills. Stock words and phrases might be helpful:

On balance.....	Weighing up the evidence....	Whilst.....	However...
In reality it depends on....	Overall.....	In the short run....	
The evidence is inconclusive.....	Generally....	Despite the fact that....	
Unfortunately...	On the other hand...	In conclusion....	

(6) TIMING

Make sure the length and detail of your answers match the command word and the mark allocation.

For example: Using graph B, describe what has happened to car ownership over the last 20 years. (2 marks)

In 1998 car ownership was only at _____. In 1999 it went up to _____. It stayed at this level for 2 years. In 2003 it went up a lot to _____ and it kept rising till it got to _____. It then increased to _____. It then dropped slightly to _____ but then rose againetc

This answer is too long and includes too much detail. The candidate needs to pick out more general trends given there are only 2 available marks.

Graph 1 clearly shows that car ownership has increased dramatically over the last decade. At the start of the period it was _____ whilst at the end it was _____. The trend has generally been upwards with the exception of 2004 where it slowed slightly. The pace of growth varies but was particularly rapid in 2005-7.

Students need to be very familiar with the format and timing of exams so that they know how much time to allocate to different questions. Poor timing costs marks. Finishing too quickly means that they are unlikely to have responded with enough depth and rigour, their answers will be superficial and may not convince the examiner they have the key skills. On the other hand working too slowly may mean you don't finish which means you throw away the marks at the end of the paper.

RTBQ

Chief Examiners are very clear. The best piece of advice than can be given to all students, whatever their ability is:

**READ THE
BLOODY
QUESTION!**

(3) WHAT PARENTS CAN DO TO HELP

(1) Show your child this handout and discuss the idea of command words with them. Do they know them? Get them to explain the demands of different command words and explain how they work in different subjects.

(2) Encourage your child to build practice of exam technique into their revision programme. It is just as important as learning material.

- ❖ **Nag them to collect past papers from their teachers.**
- ❖ **Help them use the internet to find the websites of the main exam bodies such as AQA and EDEXCEL. All these sites will have old papers on them and examples of mark schemes. Students should download these and use them as guides for revision and as tests of what they can and can't do.**
- ❖ **Encourage students to have an hour of serious exam practice a day. Make it part of the household routine-make a joke about the timing of it by acting as an invigilator for them. Reward them afterwards.**
- ❖ **Look through completed exam papers with students. You will not necessarily know or understand the content but you may be able to tell whether they have obeyed the key command word or not.**
- ❖ **Encourage students to ask teachers for "exemplar answers"-these are good models that students can follow and learn from.**
- ❖ **Encourage students to take completed exam papers into school-teachers will be more than happy to mark them as it shows real effort and commitment.**

(3) For many subjects, particularly English, Humanities and the Arts, encouraging students to read a daily newspaper helps them to think about literacy strategies and how to construct arguments.

(4) Contact subject teachers if you as parent would like any more help or guidance that would support your ability to support your child!

LIZ WOOD (15/4/08)

